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### Revisiting Wonder

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# ANDREA ROE: REVISITING WONDER

*Andrea Roe's work explores animal behaviour research and communication, and is designed to awaken experiences of wonder in nature, science and folklore. This interview by Merle Patchett encompasses a revisit in three senses. Firstly, and most importantly, the interview explores how Roe's work provokes audiences to revisit experiences of wonder in the natural world. Secondly, it is a revisit in the sense of acting as a catch-up between Roe and Patchett, who were first introduced when Roe offered to give Patchett a demonstration in the arts of taxidermy back in 2005. Thirdly, it also works as a revisit and review of Roes' work for Antennae readers since her first Antennae interview in 2008.*

Questions by **Merle Patchett**

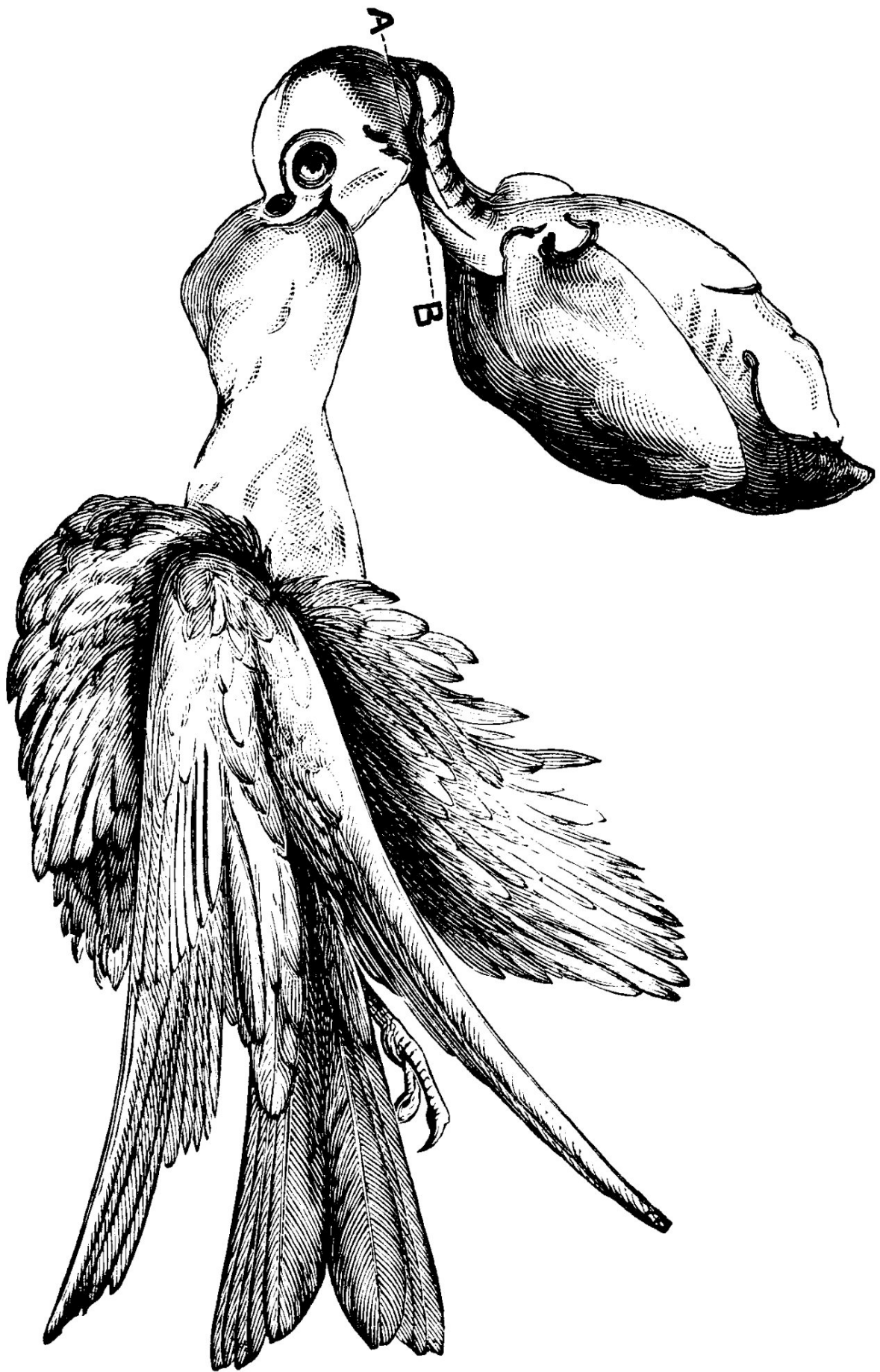
... among wonders we are born and placed and surrounded on all sides, so that to whatever thing we first turn our eyes, it is a wonder and full of wonders, if only we examine it for a little.[i] The thirteenth-century writer Albertus Magnus described wonder as “‘shocked surprise’ ... before the sensible appearance of a great prodigy,

so that the heart experiences systole. Thus wonder is somewhat similar to fear...” But fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to be, for the latter requires active engagement with objects of sensuous experience; it is a state of *interactive fascination*, not fall to your knees awe.[ii]

**A**ndrea Roe drew my attention to the delicate and sensual pleasures that can be experienced through close observation of taxidermy practice. Kate Foster, who was working as artist-in-residence in the geography department where I was based, had invited Andrea to the department to give a demonstration in taxidermy to a select group known, only by those who were members, as “Stuff Club.” “Stuff Club” had emerged as an informal support group around research I was conducting into the history of taxidermy and natural history collections, and was comprised of, aside from myself, a zoology curator (Maggie Reilly of the Hunterian Museum), a taxidermist and museum

preparator (Dick Hendry formerly of the Kelvingrove Museum), an environmental artist (Kate Foster then artist-in-residence at the University of Glasgow's Geography Department), and a geographer (Hayden Lorimer – my supervisor at the time).

Before Andrea's arrival at the department, my knowledge of taxidermy practice consisted of what I had experienced through close archival study of Dick Hendry's extensive personal collection of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century taxidermy manuals. While the descriptions of practice to be found in these manuals were instructive, and their illustrative plates illuminating, they did not offer any suggestion of the sensate aspects of taxidermy practice I was so keen



"Skin of Bird Turned Ready for Severance from Body," Montagu Brpwne, from *Practical Taxidermy* by Montagu Brown 1878.  
Illustration Courtesy Gutenberg Press 2008.

to familiarize myself with.

Aware of this, Kate had invited Andrea to give us a demonstration in taxidermy practice, as Andrea was then artist-in-residence in the Natural Science Department of the National Museums of Scotland where, among other projects, she was learning the art of taxidermy under the tutelage of specialist bird-taxidermist Peter Summers. Happy to share her developing skills with an enthusiastic audience, Andrea agreed to the Stuff Club invitation.

Andrea had brought along a greenfinch to demonstrate the setting up of a study skin, and we were using Kate's then office as a makeshift "demonstration lab." Although there were those in our company who were extremely at ease in close proximity to dead animal bodies (Maggie and Dick), Kate, Hayden and I were less familiar, and therefore a little more intrepid, as Andrea took the greenfinch out of the plastic bag she had encased it within for travel between Edinburgh to Glasgow. I, for one, was surprised that, apart from a not unpleasant musky sent, the greenfinch gave off no strong odor. As someone who previously suffered from a fear of birds I surprised even myself by asking if I could hold the dead bird body. On reflection, I think my curiosity to feel the weight of the dead bird in my hand had been sparked by Andrea's delicate cupping of the bird's body in her own. In her hands, the bird's body appeared feather-light, a morphology of almost there-ness. Rather than the old axiom "seeing is believing" Andrea had turned me on to a new one: "sensing is understanding."

Taxidermy practice could easily be perceived as a wholly revolting sensory experience, yet the disgusting, as Aurel Kolnai argues, can also exert a certain "macabre attraction" over the subject.[iii] While Kolnai is a phenomenologist, and rejects what he terms the "reductionism" of psychoanalysis, he still appreciates the psychoanalytic recognition of what he calls the "eroticism of disgust," a breed of aversion which is superimposed "upon the shadow of a desire for union with the object." [iv] The magnetism that I experienced when observing Andrea skinning and preparing the

greenfinch body into a study-skin is illustrative of this phenomenon.

While I certainly approached observing Andrea skinning the greenfinch with trepidation, the prospect also aroused a certain amount of excitement. There was something oddly erotic about the first incision cut: the wetting and parting of feathers, the delicacy of the skin which only needed the slightest prick by the tip of the scalpel to slice open the body cavity, revealing the ruby-red jewel of the belly beneath. The intimacy of the demonstration and Roe's almost ritualistic preparation and manipulation of the bird's body gave the event the air of a performance, one that perhaps you should not be witnessing, which of course contradictorily added to the exhilaration of the experience.

Although aspects of taxidermy, like skinning and cleaning out the brain from the skull, can be thoroughly revolting to witness up close by all the senses, they too were strangely compelling. As someone relatively new to the craft at the time, it was clear Roe enjoyed demonstrating to others the wondering pleasure practicing taxidermy could elicit. She communicated to us that each new bird skin offered new discoveries to be had, from the form and colour palette of feathers, to attempting to sex the bird (not always a straight forward task, especially in a young bird), to exploring the stomach contents to see what the bird had been eating:

... in preparing a bird skin, the surprise of opening up a belly and finding its prey inside or seeds giving some clue to its flight path is a detail rarely related to the viewer. It seems that the exciting, investigative work in the research laboratory is not on offer to the general public except perhaps in a diluted form. Hopefully the work I'm doing will provide an alternative viewpoint.[v]

Roe's ability to communicate the wondering pleasure of taxidermy practice, and her own capturing of the "critical moments" of taxidermy practice through video, inspired



me to undertake an ethnographic approach to the study of taxidermy for my PhD. What has struck me as special about Roe's work is her ability to extend or share her experience of wonder in the natural world with others, something as a modern society we all too easily dismiss, which is why her work is so important.

**Merle Patchett:** Through several residencies, like at the Crichton Psychiatric Hospital, the Wellcome Trust and the National Museums of Scotland, you have produced artworks responding to research and collections in these institutions. Many of the works which have emerged in response to these residencies (e.g. Cat Whisker Corridor, Dream Rabbits) seem to be driven by an intent to make specialist knowledge and "behind-the-scenes" practices and research accessible and approachable to a general audience. Can you elaborate on how you approached your role and practice as an artist-in-residence in these institutions and how this has impacted the types of works which have emerged/resulted?

**Andrea Roe:** At the Crichton Hospital I was given an entire ward as a studio, my remit being to develop new work and to organise art classes for the resident patients. In order to change the feel of the ward environment, I borrowed natural history objects from Dumfries Museum as potential inspiration for the drawing class. Amongst these objects were two taxidermied rabbits, which I used in the work *Vantage Point*. Soon after the patients were calling me "the rabbit woman." *Vantage Point* was a series of tree stumps that were laminated with green Formica, creating official high points in the landscape where the local rabbit population would gather. I had noticed that at 5:00 pm, when the nursing staff left, rabbits would start to appear. My intent was to draw attention to these other inhabitants of the hospital grounds. In the evenings, from the upstairs windows of the ward, I witnessed this daily changeover of shift and species.

Two years later in the library at the Wellcome Trust, I typed in "rabbit woman" and discovered the remarkable story of Mary Toft.[vi] In 1726 Toft, "The Pretended Rabbit



*Vantage Point*, (one of six), Andrea Roe, Formica clad tree stumps with taxidermied rabbits, Crichton Hospital, Dumfries, photo credit: Allan Devlin, 1999 © Andrea Roe

Breeder," duped the medical profession into believing she had given birth to seventeen rabbits. She was listed under incredulous births, of which there were several stories involving women and turtles, and a woman with four toads. I was drawn to these stories and interested in how they caused fear through threatening the dividing line between man and animal. Historically, the animal laboratories at the Wellcome Trust occupied the top three floors of the Euston Road building, with cockerels living on the roof to provide a supply of plasma.[vii] The sanitized office environment where I was based showed no trace of this contribution to science, and I was keen to reconnect the workforce with this animal history. During the residency, I made works where I introduced animals onto Sir Henry Wellcome's models and into underground corridor spaces.

At the NMS, I was keen to learn taxidermy so that I could reveal particular aspects of the process, and deviate from the procedure necessary for producing cabinet skins. When an animal had to be defrosted quickly, it was put in a microwave, and the sensation of holding a slightly warmed body was always a little unnerving, as if the animal was on the brink of life and about to revive. I was fascinated by the process and felt very privileged to see and hold so many different birds. I learnt that birds smell different from one another depending on what they eat; an owl for instance, smells incredibly mousey



Still from *Frozen Bird*, Andrea Roe, filmed at NMS with Richard Brown, 2006 © Andrea Roe

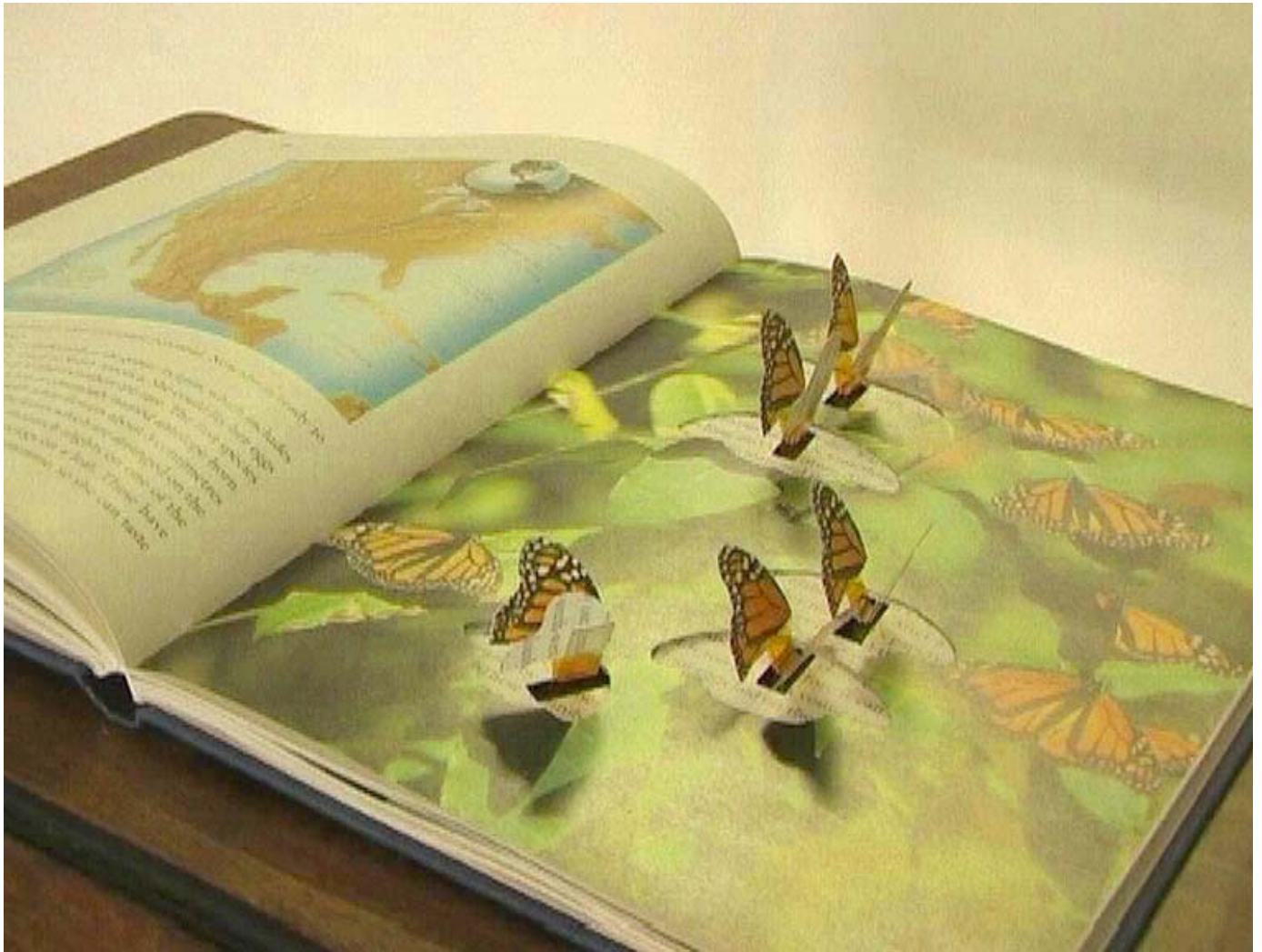
and the smell lingers on your fingers. And I remember feeling cheered if the bird laid out in front of me had a full crop of seed before it flew into a window, was caught by a cat, or otherwise met its death. The information on stomach contents and the cause of death were kept on file and offered clues to the bird's individual story. I became intrigued by the stories and was keen to put these and my experimentations out into the public realm.

**Patchett:** With the Enlightenment, the wonders of the living world became subject to systematic, scientific enquiry, and something that strikes me about your work is that it encourages audiences to tap into experiencing wonder in the natural world again. As children, we are more open to experiencing wonder, for discovering beauty and mystery. Research indicates that nature

for a open to experiencing wonder, for discovering beauty and mystery. Research indicates that nature for a child is "sheer sensory experience,"[viii] but that this tends to disappear as we begin to categorize and codify the world. Something your work seems particularly adept at is translating complex scientific research on animal behavior and communication into wonder inducing sensory encounters. (I am thinking here particularly of *Vitalism Reimagined* and *Butterfly Book*). Would you say that encouraging others to experience wonder (or to share in your experience of wonder) is an intent of your work?

**Roe:** Yes definitely so. I aim to produce work that is recognized and experienced through all the senses, as I imagine it will then be more intensely felt. With *Butterfly Book*, which uses the BBC book *Incredible Journeys* as a





Still from *Butterfly Book*, Andrea Roe, an interactive work, adapting the book *Incredible Journeys*, 2007. Video can be watched here: <http://vimeo.com/11210203> © Andrea Roe

starting point, the Monarch butterflies compete for the electrical energy supply which runs through hair-like muscle wires allowing the wings to pulse. This creates an erratic rhythm of wing beats, which gives a semblance of life and makes us believe that the cut-outs are about to lift off and migrate across the page. I think this work relates back to a childish desire to see all the natural wonders, and when it's not possible to fly off to a forest in Mexico to view the phenomenon of the Monarchs, to make a substitute.

**Patchett:** The theme of collections and collecting is prevalent in your work. Your *Butterfly* works, in particular, seem to explore the nature of collecting, the impulse to collect, and the psyche of those who do it. Can you expand upon your interest in the

figure of the collector?

**Roe:** At the NMS, in conversation with the Curator of Birds, I was privy to many stories of people who devote their lives to collecting Natural History objects. The research collection of birds' eggs at the museum includes a number of privately donated historical collections, and is particularly interesting as it reveals much about the aesthetic and scientific preferences of the individual collector. Some of the eggs have paper labels attached to them, while others have their identity inscribed directly onto the shell. Some are in organised clutches on deep layers of cotton wool in purpose built wooden cabinets, while a few are held, loosely, in an assortment of modified boxes.

The museum also holds the collection, diaries and notebooks of an ornithologist and

collector, J.H. McNeile, which include his highly detailed field notes, drawings and lists of supplies for the journeys he made to Poland, Cyprus and Turkey. They offer a comprehensive and amusing insight into his views on collecting and collectors, and reveal much about his privileged lifestyle throughout his extended (legitimate) collecting period of 1921 to the 1970's.

In the work *Every Butterfly Ever Observed*, I was interested to explore what I think is a kind of moral duality regarding collecting and collectors. I was thinking how I would love to have my own butterfly collection, but I didn't want to kill anything to achieve this. So I began to search for, and repair, dead butterflies, but was disappointed in their condition. I moved on to cutting out the life-size images from an *Observer's Book of Butterflies*. Whilst doing this, I sliced off several antennae and had to buy another copy of the book to retry and realized how the representation of the butterflies changed when the book was reprinted. As the books were reprinted twenty-seven times between 1938 and 1985, there were noticeable differences in the colour and print quality of the butterflies. I was curious to see them all, and in trying to source the books, I found that there are collectors of the *Observer's Books* themselves. After this discovery, I decided to focus attention on the collector, and I use the books as a substitute for a butterfly collection. The twenty-seven print runs are presented on an oval table of which they follow the curve. Hidden behind them are more than 3000 black entomological pins, inserted directly into the table top.

**Patchett:** Birds are often either the subject and/or the actual material of your artworks. Can you explain what inspired you to explore the lives (and deaths) of birds in your art practice?

**Roe:** Working at the museum gave me the opportunity and the time to become fascinated with birds and, through taxidermy, to be involved in their afterlives. It felt like a grave responsibility to be allowed to prepare the animal skins, and I was keen to learn to do it well. It offered a way of showing some final respect to the animal by cleaning the

skin and composing the body into a relaxed position. If the bird had been poisoned or was a casualty of netting or road kill, it would seem particularly important to do a good job in repairing tears and reorganizing distressed feathers, imagining that somehow you were assisting the bird in representing itself at its best.

As bird skins are simpler to prepare than other animal skins, and relatively easy to source (as they live and die around us), it makes them ideal for beginner taxidermists. Although equally for the accomplished taxidermist, they also offer the complex challenge of capturing the jizz, or bodily expression, of that particular bird.

**Patchett:** You cite Len Howard's book "Birds as Individuals" as a reference.[x] Can you elaborate on how her ideas have shaped your approach/artwork?

**Roe:** Len Howard was a naturalist and musicologist who studied and wrote about the birds in her garden and established a co-habitational relationship with those that roosted in her cottage. She lived as a recluse and so was able to control the environment and provide a regular food supply for the birds she studied. Up to sixty birds would roost in her cottage each evening, settling in small boxes above her bed, and she tuned her life to theirs; rising when they did, and fully involving herself with their lives. She regarded the great tit as the most intelligent of the species and wrote a series of bird biographies examining and describing their individual intelligence, and challenging what was previously thought of as instinctive behavior.

I'm interested in her approach and how her focused observation allowed her to move closer to understanding how a bird might think. She gains the trust of the birds she studies, and perhaps because they lack fear, she witnesses them at play and as characterful individuals. The birds accept her presence, and she describes instances when they communicate with her, as in the case of Star, a great tit with whom she developed a shared language. I think it's quite common for artists to work in a similar way to Howard and to temporarily lose sense of self





*Every Butterfly Ever Observed, A copy of every print run of The Observer's Book of Butterflies, Andrea Roe, entomological pins, table, 2011, photo: Michael Wolchover © Andrea Roe*

through focusing intensely on a subject. She extended her research so it became her life and was able to contribute new knowledge on the habits, preferences and relative intelligence of particular species.

**Patchett:** Your interest in Len Howard more broadly reflects a wider interest in what some might call "folk biology" or "amateur" scientific enquiry - what draws you to these non-establishment figures?

**Roe:** I'm interested in the stories of people that are compelled to go beyond the normal expectations of research or scientific enquiry, and perhaps become, or at least align themselves closely, with the thing they study. It brings up the question of what we consider to be normal behaviour and if we might correctly use the term "animalized human" to describe someone who commits their time to understanding and communicating with another species.

**Patchett:** Many of your bird works are related to your residency at the NMS and your apprenticeship in taxidermy. The anthropologist, Tim Ingold, has observed that the essence of skill "has come to lie in the improvisational ability of practitioners to disassemble the constructions of technology and creatively to incorporate the pieces in their own walks of life."<sup>[xi]</sup> I would suggest this is something you have done effectively with your "animatronic taxidermy" works like *Paddling Gull*, where you have evolved and updated aspects of the craft of taxidermy (crossing the traditional mimetic crafts of taxidermy with mechanical and electronic design), making it relevant to present concerns and audiences. Would you agree with this understanding?

**Roe:** I think all artists do this to some extent, making their own rules, remixing and reforming ideas and methodologies in an attempt to ask new questions.

For *Paddling Gull*, which was developed at the NMS during my residency, I wanted to isolate and then mimic foot-paddling in order to understand the complexity of the behaviour. As a project, it came about through discussion with many individuals and through the combined skills of clockmaker Darren Cox and taxidermist Peter Summers. My role was primarily to remind one about the needs and requirements of the other!

**Patchett:** You have stated your rationale for developing works of "animatronic taxidermy," like *Paddling Gull*, is to produce visual and sensory means for revealing the usually hidden moments of nature to a museum public. *Paddling Gull*, for example,

demonstrates foot-paddling, an activity particular to birds where they paddle the ground to imitate rain and bring worms to the surface to eat. However, *Blackbird Menagerie*, another animatronic taxidermy work, has a more sinister edge. In this work you perch a taxidermied blackbird on an art-nouveau wooden stool, where it appears to be watching a video-monitor depicting the same bird being prepared for the first incision cut that brought it to its present taxidermied form. In the video, a closed shot of just the bird-body and your hands, we see your hands dislocate the wing and leg joints, part and wet the belly feathers to expose the belly skin to which you then take up a scalpel to make the incision. However, just before you make the incision, the blackbird on the table springs to life and, flicking its tail, opens its beak and cries out a warning call. It is to no avail, of course, and the incision that brought the bird to its present state on the table inevitably goes ahead

*Blackbird Menagerie* seems to tread a fine line between provoking horror and wonder. This piece for me relates to what I said earlier about Kolnai's notion of the "eroticism of disgust," as the video asserts a kind of "macabre attraction" over the audience, which is at once exhilarating and unsettling. It seems a little sadistic to make the bird watch itself about to be cut open and then to also animate it to cry out in futile alarm. At the same time, as a viewer, you end up mimicking the bird's viewing of the video, as its gaze, the music and zooming in of the camera lens hypnotically draw and hold your attention. This is a very clever move as the audience is put in the position of the bird, enabling them to empathize with its impending and inevitable meeting with the scalpel blade. To me, it's a darkly poetic piece, as it seems as though you asked yourself while skinning the blackbird, what would the bird do if it saw itself in this position? How would you respond to this interpretation?

**Roe:** Spot on. I wanted to express both the horror and fascination that I experienced when I first opened up a bird skin. But mainly, I wanted to give the bird a voice, as I think, in taxidermy, the consent is what is missing, and





*Paddling Gull*, Andrea Roe, an animatronic, taxidermied herring gull, a collaborative project at the NMS, supported by the Leverhulme Trust, photo credit: John K McGregor, eca © Andrea Roe

that's what bothers me most.

I intended that the work be chilling, and for the bird to be viewed at first as an object, or an ornament, and for this to change, and for it to be given the status of an active subject when it comes to life and protests. It's important that the viewer sees the video from the position of the bird, and then we anticipate the climax and share the bird's shock at seeing the interior exposed.

**Patchett:** It seems that unlike *Paddling Gull*, which was made primarily for an educational museum setting, *Blackbird Menagerie* was intended more for an art gallery setting. Can you comment on how context plays a role in the work you produce or decide to show?

**Roe:** *Paddling Gull* wasn't, in fact, made specifically for the Hunterian Zoological Museum, although I agree it would have a different emphasis if shown in a gallery setting. I'm open to my work being read differently each time it's exhibited, and I would still love the opportunity to present

*Paddling Gull* directly on a gallery floor and spotlit. With *Blackbird Menagerie*, I hope it might, at some point, be appropriate to show the piece in the natural history galleries at the NMS, as it evolved from experiments done during my residency, and in this context, I think it would challenge the museum visitor, and perhaps alter their experience of viewing the animal displays.

**Patchett:** Cats seem to be another theme/subject in your work. I was particularly taken with your recent work *Defining Wildness*. Despite the cat in *Defining Wildness's* "wild-eyes," this cat is no wildcat - the slipper of its human companion gives it away as a domestic cat. How do you distinguish/define "wildness?"

**Roe:** I made the work to consider what it is to be determined wild. I am interested in how we use the word and its associations, and how it might change our interpretation of an image. In *Defining Wildness*, I'm asking if an animal can be both wild and domestic simultaneously. My interest in definitions of wildness came from reading about the endangered Scottish wildcat, and learning that because it is very difficult to differentiate the purebred wildcat from feral and domestic cats, by its pelage alone, they are almost impossible to protect.

**Patchett:** I always find the "Ideas" page on your website delightfully intriguing. Could you tell me a little more about the works *Last Stand* and *Last Song* that appear there?

**Roe:** The two works were made for a fund-raising exhibition called *Ghosts of Gone Birds*, held at Rochelle School London, and curated by Ceri Levy, whose aim was to raise money and awareness for Bird Life International's Preventing Extinctions programme. Invited artists were asked to adopt a different extinct species of bird and breathe life back into it through their art. My chosen bird, the Grand Cayman thrush, was described as grayish with reddish eyes and red legs, and was last seen and heard from in 1938. I was thinking about the last song and the person who heard it, and how you probably wouldn't know that you were





*Last Stand*, Andrea Roe, liquid plastic cast, bird legs, plinth, 2011© Andrea Roe

hearing the very last song, and you might not even be listening very carefully. I wanted to think about this sound visually, and I decided to copper electroplate a thrush tongue to represent it as an exquisite tool. This is then shown in a display case with a sonogram.

The companion piece, *Last Stand*, is a cast of a bird body sprayed grey. Its legs are brilliant red and suggest that they might still have life and potency even though the rest of the body is denuded of feathers and clearly dead. I wanted to show the bird still somehow resisting the label “extinct.”

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Andrea Roe is an artist and lecturer based in Edinburgh. She studied Sculpture at Edinburgh College of Art (1990) and Fine Art at Chelsea School of Art (2000). In 2001, she became the first artist in residence at the Wellcome Trust, and in 2005, was awarded a Leverhulme Trust residency based in Natural Sciences at the National Museums of Scotland. In 2010, she spent a year in Berlin supported by an SAC Creative Development Award and began to co-organise a series of art-science conversations with Dr. Sara Barnes and Lucy Powell. The group hosts thematic Salon evenings with invited artists, scientists, writers and curators in various venues in Berlin and the U.K.  
www.andrea-roe.com